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ABSTRACT

As one of the authors of the U.S. Constitutions, Gouverneur Morris wrote the preamble's opening phrase "We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union," and his other clauses within the document clearly mirrored his political philosophy. This booklet about Morris is one in a series on Revolutionary War soldiers who signed the U.S. Constitution, and it covers his education, his military service, and his public service to Pennsylvania as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention. Personal data about Morris and a bibliographic essay of further readings are also included. (DJC)

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Gouverneur Morris

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Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution
A Bicentennial Series

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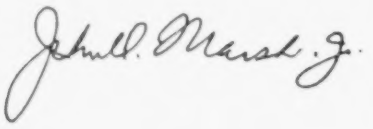
Introduction

In September 1987 the United States commemorates the bicentennial of the signing of the Constitution. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Their experiences in that conflict made them deeply conscious of the need for a strong central government that would prevail against its enemies, yet one that would safeguard the individual liberties and the republican form of government for which they had fought. Their solution is enshrined in the Constitution. The President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the nation's military forces. But it is the Congress that has the power to raise and support those forces, and to declare war. The Founding Fathers established for all time the precedent that the military, subordinated to the Congress, would remain the servant of the Republic. That concept is the underpinning of the American military officer. These twenty-two men were patriots and leaders in every sense of the word: they fought the war, they signed the Constitution, and they forged the new government. They all went on to careers of distinguished public service in the new Republic. Their accomplishments should not be forgotten by those who enjoy the fruits of their labors. Nor should we forget the fortieth man whose name appears on the Constitution. The Secretary was the twenty-third Revolutionary veteran in the Convention, who continued his service to the nation as one of its first civil servants.

This pamphlet was prepared by the U.S. Army Center of Military History with the hope that it will provide you with the background of a great American; stimulate you to learn more about him; and help you enjoy and appreciate the bicentennial.



John O. Marsh, Jr.
Secretary of the Army

GOUVERNEUR MORRIS
Pennsylvania

Gouverneur Morris, who represented Pennsylvania at the Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, was the author of much of the Constitution. The noble phrases of that document's Preamble—"We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union"—sprang from his gifted mind, and, like the finely wrought clauses that followed, clearly mirrored his personal political philosophy. Morris was perhaps the most outspoken nationalist among the Founding Fathers. Although born into a world of wealth and aristocratic values, he had come to champion the concept of a free citizenry united in an independent nation. In an age when most still thought of themselves as citizens of their sovereign and separate states, Morris was able to articulate a clear vision of a new and powerful union. He was, as Theodore Roosevelt later put it, "emphatically an American first."

Morris witnessed two of history's greatest revolutions, and both had a profound influence on his idea of government. His service as a soldier and as a key member of the Continental Congress during the American Revolution convinced him that a strong central government was needed to preserve and enhance the liberties and boundless opportunities won in the war. As ambassador to Paris during the cataclysmic French Revolution, he came to fear the excesses of power that could be perpetrated in the name of liberty. Reflecting the influence of these events on his thinking, he would later reject what he saw as unjustified assertions of authority by his own government.

Morris was an indifferent politician. His career suffered repeatedly from his frankness and impulsive and caustic tongue. Nevertheless, his personal contribution to the cause of union exceeded that of many of his colleagues. Devoted to the ideal of a strong and united country, he fought wholeheartedly for it despite his certainty that the new political and social order he was helping to shape would have little use for patricians like himself.

THE PATRIOT

The Morris family of New York, descended from Welsh soldiers, represented the closest thing to an aristocracy that could be found in colonial America. Morris' father had inherited a large manor in Westchester County, but his economic and political interests extended to nearby colonies as well. He raised two families. Gouverneur, the only son of the second marriage, knew that he would inherit only a small share of the estate and would have to work to retain the comforts and privileges of his forebears.

Morris attended local preparatory schools, and then enrolled at King's Col-

lege (now Columbia University) in New York City at the age of twelve. Here the young scholar, displaying flashes of academic brilliance, along with a streak of laziness, graduated in 1768. His speech on receiving a master's degree in 1771 reflected the ideals of his Enlightenment education as well as his own emerging political philosophy when he asserted that "love of country, for a British subject, is based on the solid foundation of liberty."

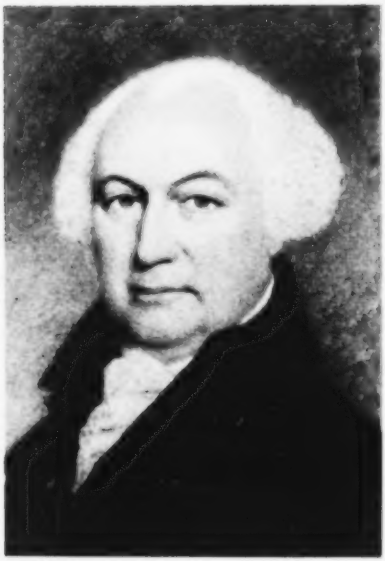
Morris was admitted to the bar after three years of study with William Smith, one of New York's leading legal minds and a strong opponent of British policies toward the colonies. The new lawyer's social status, combined with his natural wit and aristocratic grace, gave him ready access to the colony's leaders. His mentor, who had successfully instilled in Morris a greater sense of mental discipline, urged him to exploit these contacts and introduced him to rising young Patriots like John Jay and Alexander Hamilton.

Morris' political career began in 1775 when he was elected to represent the family manor in New York's Provincial Congress, an extralegal assembly organized by the Patriots to direct the transition to independence. He soon discovered that the cauldron of revolutionary events imposed a personal choice from which there could be no drawing back. Class identity and family ties should have inclined him away from revolution. Morris' half-brother was a senior officer in the British Army, his mother remained a staunch Loyalist, and Smith, now with almost a father's influence, had precipitously abandoned the Patriot cause when he saw it heading toward independence. Like many of his contemporaries, however, Morris adhered to the principle that, as he put it, "in every society the members have a right to the utmost liberty that can be enjoyed consistent with the general safety."

THE SOLDIER

Morris could have avoided military service. He was physically handicapped—scalding water had badly damaged his right arm in a childhood accident—and as a legislator he was automatically exempted from militia duty. But he viewed active service as a moral obligation and joined one of the special militia companies proliferating in New York City. These units, predecessors of the modern National Guard, trained in uniforms the members purchased themselves and acted as the city's Minutemen. By early 1776 they formed two complete regiments. Morris was asked to serve as second in command in his regiment, but withdrew when it declined transfer to the Continental Army.

Morris' major contribution to the Patriot cause lay in the political realm. As a member of the Provincial Congress, he concentrated on the formidable task of transforming the colony into an independent state. The new state's constitution was largely his work. He also displayed hitherto unsuspected financial skills, emerging as chairman of the legislature's Ways and Means Committee, which was charged with funding the state's war effort. This newfound



Pastel, by James Sharples, Sr. (1810), Independence National Historical Park Collection.

interest in detail and his willingness to undertake hard work led to numerous other assignments, including revitalizing the militia and restraining suspected Loyalists. His knack for providing a political solution to military problems led to a series of special missions. In May 1776 the state picked him to coordinate defense measures with both George Washington's main army and the Continental Congress. When the British invaded New York City and overran much of Westchester County in the fall, Morris found himself a refugee. His mother, whom he would not see for seven years, turned the family estate over to the enemy for military use. During this campaign his old regiment saw duty, and Morris probably rejoined it as a volunteer.

In 1777 he served as a member of the New York Committee of Safety. In this capacity Morris visited the northern front in the aftermath of the British capture of Fort Ticonderoga to coordinate state support of the continentals operating in that area, and then journeyed to Washington's headquarters to plead for reinforcements. In October he again took to the field as a militia volunteer, serving as an aide to Governor George Clinton during the unsuccessful American defense of the strategic Hudson Highlands fortifications.

Since his home was in enemy-occupied territory, Morris was ineligible to seek election to the new legislature. He rejected appointment to that body as an undemocratic procedure, but agreed to serve as a delegate to the Continental Congress. His major contribution to the American military effort began on 20 January 1778, the day he took his seat in Congress, when he was selected

to serve on a committee being sent to Valley Forge to coordinate military reforms with Washington. The sight of the troops in the snow—he called them "an army of skeletons . . . naked, starved, sick, discouraged"—shocked him, for he considered the continentals "the heart of America." Morris threw himself into this organizational work, serving as the Continental Army's spokesman in Congress. His support for Washington, Nathanael Greene, and Frederick von Steuben contributed directly to the success of the training and structural reforms thrashed out in the snows of Valley Forge and in the meeting rooms of Congress.

Other assignments quickly established him as a leading proponent of stronger central authority, but these nationalist views were more advanced than the thinking of most of his New York constituents. This growing estrangement, compounded by his often unstatesmanlike frankness and sarcasm, cost him reelection to Congress in 1779. Political rejection led him to resettle in Philadelphia, where he took up the life of lawyer and merchant. His interest in financial matters led to an association with the noted Patriot financier Robert Morris (no relation), and when the latter was appointed in 1781 as Minister of Finance—a sort of treasury secretary under the Articles of Confederation—Gouverneur Morris became his assistant. Together the two men participated in the informal cabinet system that arose during the closing years of the war. Through their efforts, Congress' finances were stabilized and logistical arrangements were successfully made for the crucial Yorktown campaign. In 1782 Morris introduced the idea of decimal coinage (he invented the word "cent") that later became the basis of the nation's currency.

THE STATESMAN

During the years immediately following the Revolution, Morris continued to live and work in Philadelphia, although he visited the family estate and reconciled with his mother. In fact, he made a special effort to encourage former Loyalists to participate in political affairs, arguing that as Americans they should cast their lot with the new nation. Although he remained a leading spokesman for nationalist issues, he seemed genuinely surprised when the Pennsylvania legislature selected him as one of the state's representatives to the Constitutional Convention.

The sessions of the Convention held in Philadelphia during the summer and early fall of 1787 represented the high point of Morris' public career. He went to the Convention viewing himself not just as a delegate from a particular state or even as an American, but, in his own words, "in some degree as a representative of the whole human race." For once in his life he avoided the bluntness and sarcasm that so often had diluted his usefulness to the cause of nationalism. He employed his considerable social and verbal skills to help

smooth over issues that threatened to divide the delegates, and then subtly used his position as primary draftsman to strengthen the final version of the Constitution (much as Jefferson had done as author of the Declaration of Independence). During the Convention debates, he defended ideas that had been associated with him ever since he had helped write the New York constitution in 1776: religious liberty, opposition to slavery, the right of property as the foundation of society, the rule of law, and the consent of the governed as the basis of government. His aims were ambitious and reflected his vision of a government that would serve as an example to the rest of the world.

Morris' later career never matched the level attained at the Convention. In 1789 he left for Europe on business, where he remained for a decade. During that time he twice served the new government. In 1790 he acted as a diplomatic agent for President Washington in London to resolve issues left unsettled by the peace treaty. He later replaced Jefferson as ambassador to France, then in the throes of its own revolution. Neither mission proved successful, although he did display great personal courage as the only diplomat who refused to flee Paris during the bloody Reign of Terror.

Morris returned to New York in 1798, settling in the family manor that he had purchased from an older brother. He became active in New York's Federalist party, allying himself with his friend Alexander Hamilton. The party secured his appointment to fill an unexpired term in the United States Senate, but he lacked the political popularity to win the position in his own right at the next election. Once again a private citizen, he helped lead the effort to create the Erie Canal, a project that dramatically altered the history of western development.

During the last decade of his life Morris became increasingly disenchanted with the policies of President Jefferson and his successors. Although he supported the purchase of the vast Louisiana Territory, he was particularly virulent in his condemnation of the government's restrictive economic policies and controls during the War of 1812. But no matter how angry he became with the new generation of political leaders, he never lost sight of the values of nationhood. In 1802 Morris summarized his best sentiments in a letter to fellow signer John Dickinson: "In adopting a republican form of government, I not only took it as a man does his wife, for better for worse, but what few men do with their wives, I took it knowing all its bad qualities."

The Congress shall have Power . . .
To raise and support Armies . . . ;
To provide and maintain a Navy;
To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia . . . ;

ARTICLE I, Section 8.

Personal Data

BIRTH: 31 January 1752, at "Morrisania," Westchester County, New York*

OCCUPATION: Lawyer and Merchant

MILITARY SERVICE:

Volunteer, New York Militia—2 years

PUBLIC SERVICE:

Continental Congress—2 years
United States Senate—3 years
Assistant Superintendent of Finance—4 years
Commissioner to Great Britain—1 year
Minister Plenipotentiary to France—3 years

DEATH: 6 November 1816, at Morrisania, New York

PLACE OF INTERMENT: St. Anne's Episcopal Church Cemetery, The Bronx, New York

*In 1752 the English-speaking world adopted the Gregorian calendar, thereby adding 11 days to the date and officially changing New Year's Day from 25 March to 1 January. Thus Morris' date of birth was recorded in 1752 as 19 January 1751/2.

Further Readings

Excellent biographies of Morris include Max Mintz, *Gouverneur Morris and the American Revolution* (1970); Howard Swiggett, *The Extraordinary Mr. Morris* (1952); Daniel Walther, *Gouverneur Morris, Witness of Two Revolutions* (trans. by Elinore Denniston, 1934); and Theodore Roosevelt, *Gouverneur Morris* (1888). Further information can be found in Morris' own *A Diary of the French Revolution* and in Alan Aimone and Eric Manders, "A Note on New York City's Independent Companies, 1775-1776," *New York History* 63 (1982). Books that shed light on the Constitutional period include Sol Bloom, *The Story of the Constitution* (1937); Catherine Bowen, *Miracle at Philadelphia* (1966); Merrill Jensen, *Making of the Constitution* (1979); Richard Kohn, *Eagle and Sword* (1975); Clinton Rossiter, *1787: The Grand Convention* (1966); U.S. National Park Service, *Signers of the Constitution* (1976); and Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (1969).

Cover: *Scene of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, by Howard Chandler Christy, courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.